

Chapter 5

An Examination of the Fate of Xinjiang Refugees during the Cold War

Justin M. Jacobs
American University

Abstract

This paper analyzes the office of the Nationalist Chinese “chairman” (*zhuxi*) of Xinjiang Province from Taiwan during the Cold War. This so-called government “in exile,” under the initiative of Yolbars Khan, undertook significant efforts to maintain contact with, and offer financial support to, Uyghur and Kazakh refugees in South Asia and the Middle East. A history of the relations between Yolbars Khan and the Xinjiang refugee community during the Cold War will help to explain why the political activism of prominent Xinjiang refugees such as Mohammed Emin Buğra and İsa Yusuf Alptekin failed to reach the same level of international recognition as the Dalai Lama was able to achieve for the plight of Tibet.

1. Fleeing Xinjiang

In September 1949, a steady exodus of Nationalist officials and soldiers, along with more than ten thousand anxious Kazakh nomads and various other Communist irreconcilables, streamed south from Xinjiang toward the Himalayan passes, eager to exit the province before the arrival of the People’s Liberation Army. Those fortunate enough to flee on wheels were sped recklessly through local oases, plowing through donkeys and other livestock, whose intestines came to decorate the vehicles in macabre fashion. As they neared Tibet, motorized transport was abandoned and everyone either struck out on foot or took mount, scaling snowy slopes in sub-zero temperatures. Pack animals slipped on a daily basis and fell to their demise, their splattered innards and mangled limbs traumatizing those who dared to look down. The ele-



ments were just as brutal, with lips and facial extremities peeling beyond all recognition. Numerous children froze to death, debilitating injuries were common, and few escaped chronic sickness. Some two to three months later, however, the survivors found themselves in Gilgit or Kalimpong, from whence they proceeded to Srinagar or New Delhi, many panhandling to make ends meet.¹ By 1952, some 2,300 Kazakhs, 1,300 Uyghurs, and several hundred Chinese refugees had managed to survive the flight into South Asia from Xinjiang.

As British and American diplomats in New Delhi and Isfahan were soon to learn, many of them carried fond memories of Douglas Mackiernan. Long an enigma, he is now tacitly acknowledged as the name behind the first star on the Memorial Wall at CIA headquarters, having been shot and dismembered by Tibetan border guards in April 1950. "I knew Mackiernan very well, from the time he was in charge of a small detachment of army meteorologists," recalled an assistant to J.C. Hutchison, the British Charge d'Affaires in Beijing, in 1950, "and always wondered why a man with his exceptional qualities stayed on in Urumchi after the end of the war."² We now know why: from 1945 until his death five years later, Mackiernan seems to have cultivated extensive ties with potential anti-Communist guerrilla warriors, the most famous of which was Kazakh chieftain Osman Batur, executed in 1951. The Chinese Communists were convinced Mackiernan had spent his time dangling the prospect of significant American aid to disaffected nomads come World War III, and said as much in reams of post-1949 propaganda.³

With the benefit of archival hindsight, such charges are beginning to appear less and less outlandish. Upon their arrival in Srinagar or New Delhi, prominent Uyghur and Kazakh refugees invariably asked American and British visitors the same two questions. What had happened to their good friend Douglas Mackiernan? And when was World War III due to break out? Yolbars Khan, the one-time *ordabegi* (major-domo) of the Hami khanate who had once parlayed his resistance toward warlord Sheng Shicai into an advisory post in the Nationalist government in Chongqing, was canvassed soon after his arrival at the British embassy in New Delhi. He

¹ Zhang Dajun, *Hengdu Kunlun san wan li* (Xianggang: Yazhou chubanshe, 1954), 44–45, 74–76, 86–87, 124.

² "A Report on Conditions in Sinkiang Prepared by Mr. O. C. Ellis," November 15, 1950, British National Archives, Far Eastern Department, FO 171/92207, Enclosure 2, 2.

³ Justin M. Jacobs, "The Many Deaths of a Kazak Unaligned," *American Historical Review* 115, no. 5 (2010): 1291–1314.

“has reconciled himself to awaiting hopeful developments, among which he seems (like so many other refugees) to include the possibility of a Third world war.”⁴ Hüseyin Teyci, one of the heads of some three hundred Kazakh refugees in Srinagar, revealed extensive prior contact with Mackiernan, as well as considerable apprehension over whether or not he could still leverage the latter’s investment in him. “I am very much eager to hear any news about Mr. Meckarneen who is, however, expected to have been settled down in the free world,” he wrote to John Hall Paxton, the former U.S. consul in Urumchi, now posted to Isfahan. “I did my best to welcome and preceed him at Gas-kul, my dwelling place, where I got the chance to treat and entertain him for five months as my only guest I have ever had. I am still carrying his notes and an introduction as souvenir he had written for me. I would be thankful to you if you be kind enough to get me hear of him as soon as possible.”⁵

Just as the tragic fate of one past suitor came to light, however, another suitor quickly stepped in to fill his shoes. This was the Nationalist government in Taipei, which soon issued numerous invitations for Kazakh and Uyghur refugee leaders to relocate to Taiwan. Delilhan Haji, the son of former Xinjiang Minister of Finance Janimhan (Canımhan), a Kazakh chieftain executed by the Communists in 1951, relayed his invitation to sympathetic American diplomats. Speaking in “a cultured and well-modulated voice” to those who visited his camp in Srinagar, Delilhan also sought advice from John Hall Paxton in Isfahan. “I received a letter from Formosa in which I have been invited to come to Formosa,” he informed Paxton in admirable English, adding that the Nationalists had already agreed to send him funds and a passport for the journey. “But I afraid if I will go to Formosa, the Communists may reach there. Therefore I require your consultation weather I will go to Formosa or not.”⁶ Delilhan ultimately decided to remain in Srinagar, where he kept an open and sympathetic line of communication with Taipei. For Yolbars, however, who was then sixty-three years old and thus Delilhan’s senior by some four decades, the prospect of a comfortable sinecure on Taiwan was most appealing. During an interview with

⁴ “Record of Interviews with General Yolbas Beg, Former Governor of Hami in Sinkiang, at New Delhi,” April 3, 1951, British National Archives, Far Eastern Department, FO 171/92207.

⁵ “Letter from Hüseyin Teyci to Mr. J. Hall Paxton,” January 23, 1952, National Archives of the United States, Department of State, Office of Chinese Affairs, 350.4.

⁶ “Notes on the Kazak Refugees in Kashmir” and “Letter from General Delilhan Haji to J. Hall Paxton, February 29, 1952,” National Archives of the United States, Department of State, Office of Chinese Affairs, 350.4.

British diplomats in New Delhi, Yolbars “stated his intention of going first to Kashmir to see the Sinkiang refugees there and then of continuing to Formosa where he was proposing to tell Chiang-kai-Shek of his mistake in giving arms to the Commander-in-Chief of Singkiang ... who surrendered to the Communists, when he might have given them to Yolbas who fought the Communists.”⁷

Also frequent participants in such meetings were İsa Yusuf Alptekin and Mohammed Emin Buğra, both of whom ranked extremely high on the list of Xinjiang personages desired by the Nationalist government in Taiwan. Neither man expressed any interest in relocating to Taipei, however, and instead appear to have spent the majority of their time lobbying the Indian and Turkish governments to look after the welfare of the refugees in Kashmir. The most influential factor driving the various postures of İsa, Emin, and Yolbars toward Nationalist Taiwan appears to be found in their assessment of prospects for Xinjiang’s geopolitical future. “We understand,” wrote F. E. Cumming-Bruce, a British diplomat in the New Delhi embassy, “that whereas [İsa Yusuf] Aliptakin holds that an independent Turkestan is possible, Yolbas sees that such a state would be unable to withstand Soviet determination and that the only hope for Turkestan is to seek the protection of China, while endeavouring to secure the maximum degree of autonomy.”⁸ As a result, the Nationalists were only able to recruit one of their four coveted personages to Taiwan (though Delilhan, from his base in Srinagar, later proved willing to make official appearances at the occasional political conference in Taipei).

The failure to convince either İsa or Emin to take up residence in Taiwan did not sit well with many of the Nationalist faithful in Taipei, some of whom were not enamored of the increasingly geriatric Yolbars. İsa and Emin were learned, cosmopolitan Uyghurs, flush in the prime of their careers, respected throughout the Muslim world, and thoroughly versed in the power of propaganda. By contrast, Yolbars was a product of the battlefield, and a parochial one at that. Up until now, he had never set a single foot outside of China. Furthermore, his well-known loyalty to the Nationalist government made his recruitment to Taiwan something less than a public relations coup. Of course someone like him would work for the Nationalists. In the mid-1940s, when the Nationalists finally succeeded in appointing their own governor to Xinjiang, Yolbars leveraged his well-known loyalty to Chiang Kai-shek into the

⁷ “Record of Interviews with General Yolbas Beg,” FO 171/92207.

⁸ Ibid.

reclamation of his former authority in Hami. Ever since his return, wrote one admiring Nationalist official at the time, Yolbars “has extolled the virtue of the central government to various leaders and ... strenuously refuted the absurd proposals for independence and high-level autonomy.”⁹ By contrast, luring İsa or Emin—both vocal critics of the Chinese government during the 1940s—to Taiwan would have allowed the Nationalists to parlay their recruitment into a substantial amount of political capital among Xinjiang refugees abroad.

That some top Nationalist officials in Taiwan were determined to pursue an alternative to Yolbars is clear well into the 1950s, many years after he first set foot upon the island. In November 1953, K. L. Rankin, the American ambassador in Taipei, solicited the views of Foreign Minister George Yeh regarding future Nationalist policy toward the non-Han borderlands, should the government one day succeed in retaking the mainland. Yeh took the occasion to excoriate Yolbars, calling him “ridiculous,” “illiterate,” and a “drag on the situation.” Most importantly, Yeh charged, “he is quite unacceptable to Mehmet Emin BUGRA and İsa Yusuf ALPTEKİN, whom Dr. Yeh regards as among the real leaders of the Sinkiang people -- despite their unfriendly attitude towards the Chinese Government. Dr. Yeh wished that these two men would come to Taipei but declared that, owing to Yalpus Khan’s being here (and to other reasons), they would not come here.”¹⁰ Yeh’s allegations—several of which were questionable—nonetheless reflected the views of an influential faction within the Nationalist Party. The very next year, Chu Chia-hua, president of the prestigious Academia Sinica, published a series of letters he exchanged with Mohammed Emin Buğra, in which he continued to implore his “misinformed” Uyghur friend to take up residence on Taiwan, all the while somehow managing to avoid even a single reference to Yolbars, who by then had already been “chairman” of the province for three years.¹¹

The reason Xinjiang exile politics were so contentious was because there were so few men with the necessary credentials to serve as a convincing representative for the province. Of the five former governors of Xinjiang who were still alive in 1950,

⁹ Zhongguo di er lishi dang’an guan, ed., *Zhonghua minguo shi dang’an ziliao huibian—di wu ji, di san bian: zhengzhi (wu)* (Nanjing: Jiangsu guji chubanshe, 1999), 466.

¹⁰ K. L. Rankin to Walter P. McConaughy, November 5, 1953, National Archives of the United States, Department of State, Office of Chinese Affairs, 350.4.

¹¹ Chu Chia-hua, *Taiwan and Sinkiang (Formosa and Chinese Turkistan)* (Taipei: Chinese Association for the United Nations, 1954).

two (Zhang Zhizhong and Burhan Shahidi) had defected to the Communists, one (Masud Sabri) was waiting to die in a Communist jail cell, and two (Wu Zhongxin and Sheng Shicai) had fled to Taiwan. Unfortunately for the Nationalists, the two ex-governors who had chosen to seek refuge in Taiwan were both ethnic Han. Quite apart from the obligation, ubiquitous in the age of decolonization, to elevate “indigenous” politicians to positions of conspicuous authority, both Wu and Sheng were effectively barred from participation in Xinjiang refugee politics for reasons entirely unrelated to their ethnicity. Wu Zhongxin, governor for two years dating from late 1944, was an implacable foe of both İsa and Emin, having long viewed them as “ambitious careerists” who had shrewdly played the race card to advance a separatist platform from within the Party. As a result, if the goal was to lure İsa and Emin to Taiwan, Wu would be useless.

That left Sheng Shicai. The obligations of national determination notwithstanding, there is no reason an “enlightened” Han official could not play some substantive role on behalf of Chinese claims on Xinjiang, as former governor Zhang Zhizhong continued to do for the Communists after 1949. And Sheng, for his part, had once been considered among the most “enlightened” of any Han official who had ever set foot in Xinjiang, having developed and sponsored numerous institutions of Soviet affirmative action during his eleven-year tenure as *duban*. That, of course, was all before 1937, the year when Sheng began to purge nearly everyone he had briefly enfranchised. Yolbars, in particular, dated his first period of exile from Xinjiang to Sheng’s attempts to kill him in the mid-1930s, and the two men must have taken strict pains to avoid one other at Party gatherings in Taipei. Former American consul John Paxton, during a visit to Hami in 1948, noted how Yolbars “continued throughout to extol the Chinese Government of the province since the overthrow of Sheng, for whom, alone of Chinese, Yolbars had no good word.”¹²

Even for those more concerned about placating Emin and İsa rather than Yolbars, still General Sheng was anathema. In the chaos of 1949, when eleven members of Sheng’s extended family were brutally murdered as part of a revenge plot, İsa made a special trip to Lanzhou to console the perpetrators—recast in his account as “heroes”—and lobbied for their clemency in the courts.¹³ Throughout his remaining

¹² “Travels in Southern and Eastern Sinkiang,” September 20, 1948, National Archives of the United States, Department of State, Office of Chinese Affairs, Sinkiang file 893.00.

¹³ Ma Zhiyong, “Xinjiang junfa Sheng Shicai yuefu yijia bei sha zhi mi,” *Wenshi tiandi* 9 (2008).

years on the mainland and well into the 1950s on Taiwan, Sheng grew accustomed to calls for justice whenever and wherever he attended a Party conference. By the late 1950s, the uproar over Sheng's lack of accountability reached a peak, and some people suggested that he should "commit suicide in order to appease Heaven."¹⁴ It was only the personal intervention of the Generalissimo himself that insulated Sheng from his detractors. Following his collaboration with Allen S. Whiting in 1958, with whom Sheng co-authored *Sinkiang: Pawn or Pivot?*,¹⁵ Sheng promptly dropped out of public life, changed his name, and began to carry a revolver everywhere he went, supporting himself on the 50,000 taels of gold he had siphoned off from Xinjiang's coffers two decades prior. For such a man, there was no public or private role possible within the Xinjiang exile community. Instead, Sheng appears to have limited himself to accepting the occasional consultant gig for those in government or media who were looking for historical context to Soviet designs on Xinjiang.¹⁶

All of the above did not constitute an auspicious beginning for the borderland posture of the new regime on Taiwan. In the final analysis, the Nationalists had only managed to procure one aging Uyghur dignitary, whose degree of literacy was dubious and whose loyalty had never been in question. Optimists within the Party might also point to the tacit support of a young Kazakh general in Srinagar, Delilhan Haji, who looked upon a veteran man-of-arms like Yolbars with reverence. Pessimists, however, could have noted İsa and Emin's considerable head start in the cultivation of refugee loyalties in Kashmir, as well as their extensive prior contacts throughout the Muslim world. How were Yolbars and Delilhan going to compete against İsa and Emin, who had mastered the art of Nationalist discourse but were no longer constrained by Party discipline?

¹⁴ Zhang Murong, "Li jiang hou de 'Xinjiang wang' Sheng Shicai," *Wenshi chunqiu* 11 (2003).

¹⁵ Sheng's contribution was limited to a self-exculpatory account of his time as *duban* of Xinjiang, translated into English as the second half of the book. It follows the lengthy historical analysis authored by Whiting. See Allen S. Whiting and Sheng Shih-ts'ai, *Sinkiang: Pawn or Pivot?* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1958).

¹⁶ For a complete account of the afterlife of Sheng Shicai, see Justin M. Jacobs, "Empire Besieged: The Preservation of Chinese Rule in Xinjiang, 1884–1971" (doctoral dissertation, University of California, San Diego, 2011), 380–84.

2. Recruiting Kazakhs

Once settled in Taiwan, Yolbars received for his daily paperwork a Nationalist government seal demonstrably out of place in tropical Taiwan: Office for the Chairman of the Xinjiang Provincial Government (*Xinjiang sheng zhengfu zhuxi bangongchu*). This was a special office reserved specifically for the chairman (governor) of Xinjiang alone, bereft of any claim to actual territorial administration. Three other provincial administrations operated by the Nationalists after 1949—those of Taiwan, Fujian, and, briefly, Yunnan—all retained a living tax base and tangible clumps of land to look after.¹⁷ Not so in the case of Xinjiang. The *raison d'être* for this office derived entirely from its symbolic power. By 1951, the dramatic plight of Uyghur and Kazakh refugees had caught the attention of Western media, culminating first in a lengthy *National Geographic Magazine* spread, then in a popular *Reader's Digest* account, and later in a highly embellished novelistic treatment, *Kazak Exodus*.¹⁸ “The world is looking at developments in Xinjiang very closely,” a planning committee on Taiwan observed. It was Yolbars’ job to ensure that whenever the global spotlight shined on Xinjiang, the Nationalists came out the better for it.

He began by sizing up his competition. The archival record in Taiwan opens in 1952, with letters to and from İsa and Emin, who by this point had left South Asia and relocated to Turkey. The extant missives, written in Uyghur and translated into Chinese by Yolbars or his secretary, strain to maintain a façade of civility. “I served in the central government for thirteen years,” İsa wrote to Yolbars in December. “Thinking back on it now, I accomplished absolutely nothing. It was all a waste of time. In the formulation of policy, the government never once consulted us, and it never adopted a single piece of our advice.” Embittered by the glass ceiling experienced by non-Han figures such as himself within the Nationalist government, İsa used his correspondence with Yolbars as an opportunity to vent his feelings of dissatisfaction at Han rule in Xinjiang. “If I go to Taiwan, won’t it be just like before? It is enough that you are there. Until I finish my work abroad, and until the central gov-

¹⁷ In the case of Fujian, this meant only a handful of offshore islands, while in the case of Yunnan, this was limited to jurisdiction claimed by defeated Nationalist general Li Mi in Burma.

¹⁸ Milton J. Clark, “How the Kazakhs Fled to Freedom,” *National Geographic Magazine* 106, no. 5 (1954): 621–44; George Kent, “The Kazakhs’ Fabulous Flight to Freedom,” *Reader’s Digest* 396 (1955): 111–17; Godfrey Lias, “Kazakh Nomads’ Struggle against Communists,” *The Times* (London), February 17–18, 1955; and Godfrey Lias, *Kazak Exodus* (London: Evans Bros, 1956).

ernment recognizes our achievements, then there is nothing for me to do in Taiwan. It is better for me to stay here.”¹⁹

“Here” was Istanbul. As it turned out, in the three years since 1949, İsa and Emin had been quite the industrious exiles. When they were not shuttling between New Delhi and Kashmir, they were crisscrossing the Middle East on fundraising tours among Xinjiang refugee communities from an earlier era, when Sheng Shicai had taken aim at his province’s Kazakhs. One goldmine was Saudi Arabia, where some eight thousand refugees had long since integrated into local society and were eager to donate to İsa and Emin’s cause. In 1951 alone, Yolbars learned, Emin had collected six thousand U.S. dollars in Saudi Arabia and an additional two thousand in Egypt, where the local press referred to him as the former “Governor of Turkestan.”²⁰ The funds were intended to help relocate several thousand Kazakh refugees in Kashmir to Turkey as well as publish anti-Communist propaganda from their new offices in Istanbul.²¹ In order to speak for Xinjiang in the non-Communist world, İsa and Emin needed a Xinjiang constituency that would lend legitimacy to their words. Turkey, now the only Turkic-speaking nation not under Communist rule, fit the bill. Working tirelessly with representatives from multiple governments and charity organizations, İsa and Emin ultimately succeeded in securing asylum in Turkey for 1,734 Kazakhs, along with several hundred Uyghurs. The former settled in rural Anatolia, the latter in Istanbul.²²

By the time Yolbars got his office in Taiwan up and running, İsa and Emin’s resettlement plans for Turkey were nearly complete. Nevertheless, Yolbars still sent out feelers to the refugees, ensuring that some funds from the Association for Mainland Refugee Assistance were redirected to Kashmir. He also dangled the prospect of resettlement in Taiwan. Upon learning of the proposal to send Kazakh nomads to a tropical island, a British clerk in India recorded a caustic observation: “The idea of sending Kazakhs to Formosa seems fantastic.” Nevertheless, Yolbars was determined to make up for lost time, and in three years from 1951 to 1953, he managed to direct

¹⁹ Zhongyang yanjiuyuan jindaishi yanjiusuo dang’an guan, 109/0005, “Xinjiang nanmin yiju Tu-er-qi,” 108.

²⁰ “Governor of Turkestan Has Escaped from Russia and Arrived in Cairo,” November 4, 1953, British National Archives, Far Eastern Department, FO 371/106523.

²¹ Zhongyang yanjiuyuan jindaishi yanjiusuo dang’an guan, 109/0005, 113–18, 239–42.

²² Ibid., 227–35.

US\$16,000 to the refugees in Kashmir.²³ Two of them, Kali Beg and Hamza, duly began to parrot the rhetoric of the Nationalist government. Noting that 176 Kazakhs and 13 Uyghurs had already left for Turkey, Kali Beg announced that the remainder of his band, some 180 Kazakhs, “swore an oath to remain behind in Kashmir and await orders to invade Xinjiang and eliminate the Communist bandits. We are loyal to Party and state, and will follow the blue sky and white sun flag as we march forward.”²⁴ Unbeknownst to Yolbars, however, these two Kazakh chieftains had also been in touch with American and British authorities, and seemed to be soliciting anyone with deep pockets.²⁵ In early 1952, Consul Paxton, from his office in Isfahan, was moved to send a personal check for almost three hundred dollars to the same Kali Beg and Hamza. “We have the pleasure to inform you that this amount was equally distributed by us amongst ourselves,” Kali Beg wrote back in March. “So please accept our heartfelt thanks for this aid especially from the refugees of Kazakhs 340 in number.”²⁶

At the same time that Yolbars and Kali Beg were exchanging letters, representatives from the Communist government on the mainland approached a large group of Kazakh refugees in Pakistan. After a month of free banquets and regular allowances paid out in Russian rubles, a deep split emerged. Some of the refugees returned to the mainland by sea, while others were persuaded to recross the Himalayas on their own initiative. İsa, alarmed by the sudden overtures from Beijing and Taipei, attempted to reel Kali Beg back in. “The Turkish government has recently sent representatives to agitate among us, and they are inviting us to go to Turkey,” Kali Beg informed Yolbars, referring to İsa and Emin’s outfit in Istanbul. “But I was resolute, and told them that my government is the Nationalist government, and that I will always be a citizen of the Republic of China.” By late 1953, however, the allure of the resettlement deal in Turkey, brokered almost entirely by İsa and Emin, proved too much for the destitute refugees to turn down. Only Kali Beg and a hundred of his followers remained behind, in a final bid for Nationalist largesse. “People from Xinjiang

²³ “Kazakh Refugees,” October 12, 1951, British National Archives, Far Eastern Department, FO 371/92897; and Letter from Orville L. Bennett to Dr. George A. Fitch,” March 24, 1955, National Archives of the United States, Department of State, Office for Refugees, Migration, and Voluntary Assistance.

²⁴ Zhongyang yanjiuyuan jindaishi yanjiusuo dang’an guan, 109/0005, 129–30.

²⁵ Godfrey Lias conveyed their overtures to Winston Churchill in *Kazak Exodus*, 229.

²⁶ Letter from Kali Beg and Hamza to J. Hall Paxton, March 13, 1952, National Archives of the United States, Department of State, Office of Chinese Affairs, #6p Sinkiang.

are scattered throughout many Muslim countries now," Kali Beg wrote. "If the central government ignores us, then it will have a negative impact on foreign relations with the Muslim nations of the Middle East, and they will begin to suspect that the government looks down on the weak peoples of the world."²⁷

Yet news of the resettlement of 1,734 refugees to Turkey had severely undermined Kali Beg's declarations of loyalty to the Nationalist government in Taiwan. This in turn undermined Yolbars' ability to lobby on their behalf. "In light of current financial difficulties," the Executive Yuan in Taiwan announced soon after hearing of the resettlement in Anatolia, "it will no longer be possible to provide relief funds to Xinjiang refugees in India and Pakistan. At this time of hardship, we hope our compatriots will be able to cultivate a spirit of 'overcoming all hardship' and look after their own provisions." Though Yolbars scrambled to come up with a formal blueprint to bring Kali Beg and his hundred followers to Taiwan, the anticipated price tag (US \$30,000) for their relocation was seen as too high to justify the benefits that their publicity might facilitate. Instead, the Nationalist government decided—quite optimistically—that it could try to work through İsa and Emin, and attempt to foster symbolic declarations of loyalty from among the resettled refugees.²⁸ Unwilling to admit that İsa and Emin had "won" the opening round of Xinjiang refugee politics, certain voices within the Nationalist Party, such as Foreign Minister Yeh, instead took to blaming Yolbars for the exodus of nearly two thousand Kazakhs—former citizens of the Republic of China—to Turkey.

3. The Rift between Taiwan and Turkey

The idea that the Nationalist government could simply work through İsa and Emin was based upon a faulty assumption; namely, that the interest was mutual. Once the refugees were settled in Turkey and the prospect of additional aid from Taiwan diminished, however, serious doubts began to surface. "Of course we are extremely excited about news of an impending counterattack on the mainland," Emin wrote to Yolbars in February 1953. "But never once did we receive a clear indication of what the government's position will be regarding Xinjiang." In order to facilitate preparations for the retaking of the mainland, Emin demanded that Taipei issue a

²⁷ Zhongyang yanjiuyuan jindaishi yanjiusuo dang'an guan, 109/0005, 175–80, 171, 110.

²⁸ Zhongyang yanjiuyuan jindaishi yanjiusuo dang'an guan, 152.11/0048, "Xinjiang sheng zhengfu ji Zhongguo huijiao xiehui zhi guomin waijiao huodong," 30; and 109/0005, 216–19, 229, 246–47, 256.

clear statement regarding its “attitude” toward Xinjiang. “If the government insists on being as stubborn as before and continues to view Xinjiang as an inseparable province of China,” he added, “then I assure you that the disputes and disagreements will never end.” Yolbars countered with vague assurances. “As far as I know, the government plans to respect the opinions of local figures and implement regional autonomy,” he replied. He then cautioned Emin not to let his political ambitions cloud his judgment. “You are an old veteran cadre of the Party,” he wrote, “and you have served the central government for a long time now. You have studied the dictates of our late Premier [Sun Yat-sen] and know what the fundamental policies of the Party are. Surely you do not harbor any misconceptions on that front.” Instead, Yolbars tried to focus all attention on the Communist threat to their homeland. “Mutual suspicions and individual pursuits will only serve to divide our strength.”²⁹

But the rift was clear, and Yolbars was quick to remind his detractors of Emin’s continued “intransigence.” Just three months after this exchange, Yolbars submitted a comprehensive plan to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to raise the Nationalists’ profile in the Middle East. He now blamed the “conspiracy of Emin” for the way in which “two thousand of our Kazakh compatriots were seduced into adopting Turkish citizenship,” and elsewhere referred to “selfish and scheming individuals like Emin and İsa.” To make matters worse, the Communist government in Beijing had also begun to send formal Muslim diplomatic delegations to the Middle East, an initiative that dovetailed with its interest in those refugees still living in Pakistan. In response, Yolbars proposed a detailed list of countermeasures. He suggested bringing some of the refugees from Turkey to study in schools on Taiwan, staffing Nationalist embassies abroad with Muslim personnel, sending an annual delegation to the World Muslim Council, and participating in the *hajj* to Mecca. This last proposal met with enthusiasm, and plans got underway to organize a pilgrimage to Mecca the following year. Yolbars himself would headline the delegation. In the meantime, in January 1954, Emin paid a visit to the Nationalist embassy in Ankara with his wife, not realizing that Yolbars had been forwarding his letters up the Nationalist chain of command. Much to Emin’s surprise, the ambassador lashed out at him for “advocating Xinjiang independence and separation from the Republic of China.” In no uncertain terms, Emin was told that “the central government will never grant you independence,” and that “bad things” would happen to him if he persisted

²⁹ Zhongyang yanjiuyuan jindaishi yanjiusuo dang’an guan, 109/0005, 109, 120–121.

in “pursuing such proposals abroad.” Though the ambassador still forwarded Emin’s request for \$400 to Taipei, it was now clear that any further largesse would come with tight strings attached.³⁰

On July 17, 1954, with tensions running high, Yolbars, his son, and three other prominent Hui officials boarded a plane for Egypt. Though the Nationalist press touted this *hajj* delegation as an opportunity to win over Middle Eastern leaders, the real goal was to bring İsa and Emin to heel. Chiang Kai-shek approved additional relief funds for distribution among Xinjiang refugees, and Yolbars vowed to convince İsa and Emin to relocate to Taiwan.³¹ On July 26, the long awaited reunion took place in Cairo. Yolbars handed İsa a goodwill gift of \$2,000 and asked him to come to Taiwan. According to Yolbars, İsa countered with a request for another \$10,000 as a Nationalist show of faith in his cause. Yolbars must have demurred, because suddenly the gloves came off. “The government has never trusted me,” İsa said, “instead giving power to Zhang Zhizhong, Masud, and finally Burhan [i.e., the last three governors of Xinjiang]. Though I once received the post of secretary, still the government did not trust me.” Five years later, İsa was still smarting from an incident with Nationalist border guards in 1949, who had apparently detained and roughed him up as he tried to flee the province. He now realized that his service for the Nationalists in Xinjiang a decade prior had all been a charade, and that Chiang Kai-shek had simply used him as a rhetorical counterweight to the Soviet puppet government in Ili. “The government fanned my hatred for communism and the Soviet Union, but then let Xinjiang fall into their very hands. As a result, untold numbers of anti-Communist youth were slaughtered and thousands of refugees fled abroad. The government cannot shirk responsibility for this tragedy.”³²

Yolbars appears to have been taken aback by İsa’s tirade, for his account contains no indication of a rebuttal. Not so two weeks later, when they met again in Mina, a town just outside of Mecca. This time İsa showed up with a host of refugees in tow. They immediately put Yolbars on the defensive. “We hear that you are destitute in

³⁰ Zhongyang yanjiuyuan jindaishi yanjiusuo dang’an guan, 152.11/0048, 21–22; 109/0005, 226, 239–42; and Letter from Yolbars Khan to Mr. George Fitch, Far East Director of the Committee to Aid Refugee Chinese Intellectuals, July 1955, National Archives of the United States, Department of State, Office of Chinese Affairs, #6p Sinkiang.

³¹ Zhongyang yanjiuyuan jindaishi yanjiusuo dang’an guan, 105.22/0005, “Juyu feibang chaosheng tuanti qianzheng; zhu Sha dashiguan zhoubao,” 89–90, 95–96, 110, 119.

³² Ibid., 157–58.

Taiwan and have had to borrow money to make ends meet,” Yolbars later recounted them as saying. “If you like, you can remain here with us and we will make sure that all of your living expenses are met. Rest assured that we have the means to take care of you.” In addition, they blamed the loss of Xinjiang on the Nationalist failure to grant high-level autonomy to the province. This time, however, Yolbars came prepared with a rebuttal. “It is inappropriate to raise words of accusation at this time and place,” the minutes record him as saying. “Unless we succeed in our goal of retaking the mainland, all talk of other matters is nothing more than hot air.” If they wanted high-level autonomy in Xinjiang, Yolbars suggested, then they would have to earn it by deeds, not words. “I obtained my current titles as Governor and Commander of Xinjiang Pacification neither before the loss of Xinjiang nor after arriving in Taiwan,” he explained. “They were bestowed on me while I was in the mountains waging war on the Communists.” If İsa wanted an official statement on high-level autonomy or independence for Xinjiang, Yolbars suggested, then he and the refugees would first have to unite with the Nationalist government on Taiwan and work together for the liberation of the mainland.³³

In the evening İsa returned for a third meeting. Yolbars did not even bother to record a detailed set of minutes for the occasion, noting merely that he “again complained about the government’s lack of trust in him and revisited his abuse at the hands of the border patrol officer” in 1949. When Yolbars again visited İsa at his lodgings the next day, he found sixty refugees waiting for him. They must have had some choice words, for Yolbars immediately launched into a spirited defense of his past. “When Sheng Shicai leaned toward the Soviets and united with the Comintern,” Yolbars said, “I fled to the central government and met high-ranking officials on İsa’s introduction. The details of my service in the central government are well known to İsa and he can vouch for me. I have never been bought off by the Han and I am certainly not their running dog. İsa is in attendance here today. Go ahead and ask him whether or not this is true.” One month later, upon his return to Taiwan, Yolbars hurried to debrief the Generalissimo. His conclusion was decidedly pessimistic. The goal of “preventing İsa and Emin from being used by others” would prove “very difficult to meet,” he wrote. Over the course of four heated meetings in Egypt and Saudi Arabia, two things had become clear. First, İsa and Emin’s “true colors” had emerged: they were now hostile to Han rule in general, be it in Nationalist or Com-

³³ Ibid., 158–59.

munist guise. And second, Xinjiang refugees throughout the Middle East were fast falling under their wing, imbibing a narrative of ethnic conflict that elided the many contributions İsa and Emin themselves had once made on behalf of Chinese rule in Xinjiang.³⁴

Faced with a propaganda war on two fronts, Yolbars quickly got to work. He renewed his correspondence with Kali Beg in Turkey, and through him learned of other former nomads in rural Anatolia who were either unhappy with the life of a farmer, annoyed at İsa and Emin, or both. Working through the Nationalist embassy in Ankara, Yolbars extended an offer of free university education for any disaffected refugees, permitted they were willing to study in Taiwan. Among the hundred or so volunteers was Kali Beg's own son. At the same time, Yolbars petitioned George Yeh, the Nationalist Minister of Foreign Affairs, to build a new mosque in Taipei, in hopes of making a positive impression on visiting Muslim dignitaries. The *hajj* trips to Mecca became a near annual occurrence, though poor health and advanced age precluded Yolbars' inclusion. As for the rift with İsa and Emin, Nationalist authorities simply acted as though nothing had happened, continuing to claim both men as allies in the press. They combined their public silence on the "Eastern Turkestan" issue with a slew of new propaganda from Yolbars' office, including *Frontier Culture* (*bianjiang wenhua*), a monthly pictorial highlighting Uyghur, Kazakh, Tibetan, and Mongol loyalty to the Republic of China.³⁵

The publication of *Frontier Culture* in October 1955 coincided with the designation by Beijing of Xinjiang province as the "Uighur Autonomous Region." If Yolbars understood the modified Soviet calculus of the Chinese Communists on this front, his pronouncements in the press gave no indication of it. He went on public record denouncing the move as a "stepping stone" to formal annexation of Xinjiang by the Soviet Union, and claimed that Moscow had succeeded in "swallowing up" China's northwestern province. Aware only of Beijing's discourse but lacking eyes on the ground, Yolbars may actually have believed that Beijing "had to satisfy its master in the Kremlin." The Nationalist Ministry of Foreign Affairs, however, was less quick to jump to such conclusions. After a thorough examination of an atlas recently pub-

³⁴ Ibid., 159–60.

³⁵ Zhongyang yanjiuyuan jindaishi yanjiusuo dang'an guan, 109/005, 246–47, 251–53; 112.22/0003, "Tu-er-qi jizhe fang Tai; lü Tu-er-qi huaqiao fang Tai; lü Ba-ji-si-tan huaqiao Sha-bu-lei; Ai-sha zhangzi Mu-la-de fang Hua; Zhong Tu youhao xiehui," 28–31; and 152.11/0048, 111–14.

lished on the mainland, one official observed that “Yining, Tacheng, and Altay are all still present on the bandits’ map.” This official, thinking that perhaps Yolbars had based his comments on dubious intelligence gleaned from refugees, concluded that the comments in the press by Yolbars and other Nationalist officials were mere hyperbole, and that Xinjiang had not literally been “swallowed up” by Moscow. “Though Soviet ambitions in northern Xinjiang are well known,” he wrote, “even the Communist bandits would not lightly give away a chunk of our national territory.”³⁶

It was this uncompromising aspiration for political and national sovereignty, a goal shared by both Chinese Communists and Nationalists alike, that ultimately determined the fate of Chinese border politics during the Cold War. Simply put, neither Chiang Kai-shek nor Mao Zedong would willingly countenance the separatist activities of non-Han actors, be they in Turkey or Tibet. During the 1959 Tibetan uprising against the Communist government, the Generalissimo, while eager to exploit the revolt for his own aims, was unable to bring himself to support the goals of the rebels.³⁷ To do so would be to betray the ideal of national unity. It was the same with Xinjiang. In July 1956, when Yolbars issued a comprehensive report on the activities of İsa, Emin, and the Chinese Communists among Middle Eastern countries, he made a telling assessment. “Taking advantage of their physical proximity,” he wrote, İsa and Emin “frequently lure [the refugees] with promises of gain, threatening and cajoling them with considerable skill. From their bases of operation in Istanbul and Cairo, they publish journals and magazines, thereby swaying hearts and minds and influencing international opinion.” The implications for Nationalist policies on Xinjiang were clear and surprising. “We should worry more about these activities than those of the Communist bandits.”³⁸

In other words, the threat of non-Han separatism was deemed of greater concern than that of a Communist regime committed to the protection of China’s national sovereignty. To be sure, Yolbars kept meticulous tabs on the many cultural and religious delegations sent by the mainland to various Middle Eastern countries, and he often noted the participation of “the traitor Burhan.” But these reports quickly became routine. Far more worrisome were indications that Xinjiang refugees in Turkey

³⁶ Zhongyang yanjiuyuan jindaishi yanjiusuo dang’an guan, 152.11/0048, 186–93; and 119.5/0001, 228.

³⁷ Jay Taylor, *The Generalissimo: Chiang Kai-shek and the Struggle for Modern China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 505–6.

³⁸ Zhongyang yanjiuyuan jindaishi yanjiusuo dang’an guan, 152.11/0048, 124.

were lending a willing ear to the increasingly hostile ethnopopulist platform of İsa and Emin, who now ran the Eastern Turkestan Refugee Association in Istanbul. These shifting dynamics were apparent in a letter sent to Yolbars in 1958 by a Uyghur man who identified himself in Chinese as “Wahede” (likely “Wahid” or “Ahad” in Uyghur).³⁹ Once a lieutenant-colonel in the Nationalist army in Xinjiang during the 1940s, Wahede fled to Istanbul in 1949 and there came in touch with İsa and Emin’s refugee community. In 1957, he wrote a letter to Chiang Kai-shek requesting a military pension. His plea apparently fell on deaf ears, for the following year he wrote a letter to Yolbars filled with violent imagery. “It is very difficult to get one’s debts back from the Han,” he wrote. “Unless you slit their throats you can’t get anything.” Referring to the Chinese staff at the Nationalist embassy at Ankara as “authoritarian Han,” he lambasted the “many excuses they have for why they cannot help a Uyghur compatriot.” But the Han themselves, he continued, “have tons of money, travel to all the gorgeous places in the world, and live in beautiful Western houses.” In order to enforce his claim for a military pension, Wahede stated his intention to murder an embassy employee. “Maybe if I do this, I can knock some sense into the Han.” He signed off with a declaration that “it will be my glory to dispatch of such an enemy.”⁴⁰

It seems safe to say that Wahede’s letter did not elicit much sympathy in Taiwan. Yet it must have been unsettling to see a former lieutenant-colonel in the Nationalist army transformed into a hate-spouting proponent of ethnic violence. This was a loyal Uyghur who had once risked his life for the Nationalist cause. Once he arrived in Istanbul, however, where the close-knit Uyghur community numbered in the hundreds, it would have been difficult to remain aloof from İsa and Emin’s orbit, if for no other reason than the indispensability of their services in navigating the Turkish immigration bureaucracy. The lesson for Yolbars and the Nationalist government on Taiwan was clear: without vigorous countermeasures in relief funds, educa-

³⁹ If “Wahid,” then it seems probable that this man was İmin Wahidi or one of his relatives. İmin Wahidi had been involved in nationalist initiatives in the 1930s and worked under Mahmud Muhiti. He also left a memoir, which has been analyzed by Ondřej Klimeš. See Klimeš, *Struggle by the Pen: The Uyghur Discourse of Nation and National Interest, c. 1900–1949* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2015), 127–28.

⁴⁰ Zhongyang yanjiuyuan jindaishi yanjiusuo dang’an guan, 107/0001, “Tu-er-qi renwu zhi; Xinjiang ji Wa-he-de shenqing zhengjian; Xinjiang ji Su-dan shenqing zhengjian; Xinjiang ji Pa-la-ti xueli shengqing zhengjian,” 61, 107–9.

tion, and propaganda, Xinjiang refugees throughout the Middle East would eventually begin to parrot the anti-Han discourse of İsa and Emin.

4. Taiwan Gains the Upper Hand

Despite the insinuations of İsa's refugees in Mecca, Yolbars appeared to be doing quite well for himself on Taiwan. In 1966, the *United Daily News* (*Lianhe bao*) reported on a thief who had broken into his home and stolen NT\$200,000 worth of jewelry and other valuables, suggesting a life of considerable wealth and privilege.⁴¹ Yet Yolbars, now entering his seventh decade, felt the wear of his age more than ever, and was often confined to his desk. This, however, did not prevent him from continuing to attend official government functions, host the occasional delegation from Muslim countries, and continue to arrange for more exchange students from Turkey. In 1960, one such student, Chengis Yarbağ, asked for more money to fund his studies. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs informed Yolbars that expenses for these refugee students were becoming "excessive." Still, the cost was worth it. "Since it is our nation's policy to take care of our border peoples, and seeing as İsa and Emin continue to raise the flag of independence at this time," the same memo observed, "we too will actively continue to cultivate the loyalty of our expatriate sons overseas for our own ends."⁴²

Things changed again in the mid-1960s, when new developments began to alter the refugee landscape. First, in 1965, Emin died in Istanbul, aged sixty-four. İsa, who would live another three decades, now moved to exert even greater control over the exile community in Turkey. He immediately took the Eastern Turkestan movement to a new level. In April 1965, he traveled to Mecca to make a presentation at the eleventh session of the World Muslim Congress. He asked the delegates assembled there to pass a resolution encouraging the Nationalist government on Taiwan to declare "Eastern Turkestan" independent of China and to abolish the "colonial name" of Xinjiang. In addition, member nations were asked to commit to providing both tangible and moral support for Xinjiang refugees throughout the Middle East. When a representative from Syria seconded the motion, Nationalist spokesman Sun Shengwu immediately lodged a note of protest, invoking Congress prohibitions against involvement in politics. The next day the representative from Saudi Arabia, a

⁴¹ *Lianhe bao*, March 9, 1962; January 30, 1963; June 25, 1963; and February 25, 1966.

⁴² Zhongyang yanjiuyuan jindaishi yanjiusuo dang'an guan, 112.22/0003, 34–35.

staunch ally of the Nationalist government, rallied to Sun's defense, declaring that Muslims everywhere must adapt to the conditions of the country in which they live. In his notes, Sun recorded his satisfaction in seeing İsa pack up his briefcase to leave, only to be dissuaded by the Congress host.⁴³

After the initial blindside, Sun Shengwu regained his composure. Several days later, he issued a rebuttal. "Mr. İsa was appointed by our very own government as secretary-general of the Xinjiang Provincial Government," Sun read. "Once the Communist Party began to occupy the mainland and Xinjiang, all the provincial leaders fled abroad. Except for a small number of ambitious careerists like İsa, the majority of them have continued to embrace the legal government of the Republic of China." It was here that the recruitment of Yolbars and two decades of funding for the activities of his office paid huge rhetorical dividends. "In Taiwan we have set up an Office for the Chairman of the Xinjiang Provincial Government, and it is chaired by Yolbars Khan, a Uyghur Muslim. This office provides relief aid and succor for dispersed refugees, and draws up plans for the recovery of lost territory." The biggest blow to İsa's narrative of legitimacy, however, came when Sun divulged his extensive history of cooperation with the Nationalist government, a rhetorical strategy deployed to great effect by Yolbars during his spirited debate with İsa at Mina. "The political status of China's Muslims are not below that of any other Muslim nation," he concluded. "Indeed, Mr. İsa himself has now been nurtured and mentored by our government for more than three decades." In his report, Sun again recorded with relish the sight of İsa "folding up his briefcase and preparing to depart." In front of the assembly, however, Sun attempted to retain the moral high ground. He made a grand show of extending an invitation to İsa to come to Taiwan and "participate in the sacred task of resisting communism and recovering the mainland," and promised to submit his grievances to the Nationalist government for "consideration."⁴⁴

Back in Taiwan, Yolbars was getting help from unexpected quarters. The disastrous famines of the Great Leap Forward (1958–61) and persecution campaigns on the mainland had resulted in a renewed crop of 701 refugees from Xinjiang. (In an unrelated incident in 1962, tens of thousands of Uyghurs and Kazakhs fled to the Soviet Union, where neither Beijing nor Taipei could attempt to win their loyalties). These new refugees ended up in Pakistan and Afghanistan, neither of whose govern-

⁴³ Ibid., 152.11/0045, "Huijiao renshi Sun Shengwu yu Xiao Yongtai," 40–43, 46–48.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 152.11/0045, 61–66.

ments recognized Taipei. One refugee in particular stood out from the pack, a man by the name of Sabik. In December 1963, two years after his escape from Xinjiang, he wrote a letter to the Nationalist ambassador in Ankara, who duly forwarded it onward to Yolbars. Sabik related the following story. A native of Yarkand in southern Xinjiang, he was once a member of several Nationalist Party organizations, including the local branch of the Uyghur Association for Ethnocultural Advancement, a vestige of the Sheng era. Formerly a well-to-do man, he described repeated imprisonments after 1949, including the confiscation of US\$60,000 in assets. During the famines of the Great Leap Forward, he claimed—most unlikely—that starving Han had resorted to eating Uyghur babies.⁴⁵ In 1961, following his wife's remarriage to another man, he contacted relatives in Afghanistan and managed to flee as part of a trade caravan. Once in Kabul, the Afghan government pressured the refugees either to return to Xinjiang or resettle in another country. After turning to the Americans for help, he was encouraged to get in touch with both İsa in Istanbul and the Nationalist embassy in Ankara.⁴⁶

Yolbars sensed a golden opportunity. Sabik's background was not unlike that of Wahede, the one-time loyal Nationalist lieutenant-colonel turned violent anti-Han racist. Furthermore, because Sabik was from Yarkand, where İsa once maintained an influential base of operations, Yolbars worried that the two men would quickly form a bond. When, for reasons that are unclear, İsa proved slow to respond, Yolbars sprung into action. "In this hour of need, when life and death hang in the balance," he wrote to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "İsa and Emin have abandoned these refugees. The political significance of a rescue effort undertaken by our government at

⁴⁵ Though it is now clear that cannibalism was a common strategy of survival in many regions of China during the Great Leap Forward, there are several reasons why this claim is suspect with regard to Xinjiang. First, Xinjiang suffered perhaps the least of any region in China during the Great Leap Forward, to the point where it soon became a net exporter of grain to other regions in China. On this point, see Li Danhui, "Dui 1962 nian Xinjiang Yi-Ta shijian qiyin de lishi kaocha: laizi Zhongguo Xinjiang de dang'an cailiao," in *Zhanhou Zhong Guo guanxi ruogan wenti yanjiu: laizi Zhong E shuangfang de dang'an wenxian*, ed. Shen Zhihua and Li Danhui (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 2006), 486–514. Second, in those rural areas where starvation might possibly have occurred in Xinjiang, the state maintained a strict policy of segregation between Uyghur and Han communities, the latter tightly insulated within military colonies.

⁴⁶ Zhongyang yanjiuyuan jindaishi yanjiusuo dang'an guan, 119.5/0001, "Zhiliu A-fu-han Xinjiang nanmin," 11–12.

this time would be considerable.” Though Yolbars wanted to bring them to Taiwan, the Ministry urged them to relocate to Turkey, which was now offering to pay for their relocation expenses. Events soon conspired to undermine this arrangement. First, İsa finally wrote back to Sabik, “scolding me for exchanging letters with Governor Yolbars.” Suddenly aware of the deep schism that ran throughout the Xinjiang refugee community, Sabik informed Yolbars that he “no longer wanted to go to Turkey, since it will be hard to get along with my compatriots there if İsa is acting like this.” Instead, Sabik asked Yolbars if he could help them travel to Saudi Arabia, where the Xinjiang exile community was more prosperous. But even that would prove difficult now. Alerted to Turkey’s offer of resettlement, Beijing began to put pressure on Kabul to reverse its stance and let the refugees remain in Afghanistan. At least in this case, it seems, the Communists were more determined than the Nationalists to keep potential recruits out of İsa’s reach.⁴⁷

For his part, Yolbars, informed that his own government was unwilling to assume the burden of mass resettlement in Taiwan, saw little reason to help them relocate to Saudi Arabia, where the existing refugee community maintained extensive contacts with İsa. In Afghanistan, however, Sabik could continue to work on behalf of the Nationalist government as a covert agent among the steady stream of refugees who continued to file out of Xinjiang. With relocation efforts stalled, Kabul fast became the next battleground for İsa and Yolbars. According to Sabik, İsa sent his men to Afghanistan to spread rumors about the negative effects a Nationalist passport would bring to its owner, and further promised to sponsor free annual *hajj* trips to anyone who relocated to Turkey. They apparently also brought letters from refugees in Istanbul attesting to the luxurious life they were living under İsa’s patronage. Yolbars countered by lodging urgent requests with his own government for relief funds to be distributed among Sabik’s followers. It is not clear how much, if any, money was actually dispensed at this time, but something in Yolbars’ overtures must have been sufficient to give many of the refugees pause. For, by 1967, when İsa finally succeeded in leveraging UN support for their resettlement in Turkey, only 235 of Sabik’s 701 followers took up the offer. The remainder—how many in each case is not clear—either moved on to the Soviet Union, relocated to Taiwan, or simply remained in Kabul, where Sabik continued to speak on their behalf in his correspond-

⁴⁷ Ibid., 14–20, 51–53, 96–100.

ence with Yolbars. In his own documents, Yolbars began to refer to Sabik as “my secret agent and contact man in Afghanistan.”⁴⁸

For the next four years, Sabik was exactly that. The complex wheelings and dealings of the Xinjiang exile community need not detain us here, but suffice it to note that during these years Sabik seems to have served as a highly effective counterweight to Īsa among the Middle Eastern exile community. Shuttling back and forth among Iran, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, and Taiwan, he was entrusted with ever greater sums of money, numbers that peaked in 1969 with the deposit of US\$25,000 in an Iranian bank account. Such large sums of money inevitably opened Sabik up to accusations of graft, and—if the counter-accusations can be trusted—Īsa’s men never missed an opportunity to fan the rumor mill in Kabul. An investigation by Yolbars’ son purported to clear Sabik of any wrongdoing, and merely advised him to obtain a signed receipt whenever money changed hands. In 1969, the Xinjiang refugee population in Afghanistan having suddenly swelled to 12,000, largely as a result of renewed chaos during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76). Yolbars gave Sabik his biggest task yet, flying him out to Taiwan to draw up comprehensive blueprints that would provide this exile community with the necessary start-up capital to maintain a livelihood in Afghanistan. The archives for this time period are filled with requests for relief funds from newly arrived refugees. More often than not their wishes were granted, with gifts ranging anywhere from one to six hundred U.S. dollars apiece. With confidence running high, Yolbars, cognizant of his impending mortality, even offered his governorship to Īsa, provided he assumed it on Taiwan.⁴⁹

During the late 1960s, the momentum continued to shift in Yolbars’ favor. By 1969, the son of former Xinjiang governor Masud Sabri (1947–48), once a devout follower of Īsa, had broken off contact with his former mentor and informed Yolbars that he would like to visit Taiwan. With his coterie of covert agents across the Middle East growing fast, Yolbars decided that the time was ripe to spur his greatest ally into action. This was General Delilhan Haji, the one-time Kazakh guerrilla warri-

⁴⁸ Ibid., 101–7, 150–53, 220, 225, 242–50. See also “Information: Refugees: From East Turkestan,” November 17, 1967 to October 17, 1968, British National Archives, Far Eastern Department, FO 95/15.

⁴⁹ Zhongyang yanjiuyuan jindaishi yanjiusuo dang’an guan, 119.5/0001, “Jiuji Xinjiang nanbao” and “Zhiliu A-fu-han Xinjiang nanmin,” 47–48; and 119.5/0002, “Jiuji Xinjiang nanbao.”

or and son of the former Minister of Finance in Nationalist Xinjiang. Delilhan, who had remained in Srinagar but kept up a voluminous correspondence with Yolbars, declined numerous offers of relocation to either Turkey or Taiwan. He did, however, deign to fly out to Taipei on several separate occasions in the 1950s and 60s to participate in Nationalist Party congresses as a formal “representative” from Xinjiang. In possession of an Indian passport, Delilhan seems to have served as an intelligence agent for both the Indian and Taiwanese governments. Delilhan also made several trips to Afghanistan to liaison with Sabik, and even took over the latter’s responsibilities for a time when accusations of graft temporarily sidelined Yolbars’ “secret agent.”⁵⁰ That same year, however, Delilhan made his biggest move yet: he and his brother decided to abandon their home of nineteen years in Srinagar and spend their twilight years in Istanbul, İsa’s home turf.

Neither Delilhan nor his brother, cut from the same ideological cloth as Yolbars, liked what they saw. The second generation of Kazakh youth had been almost entirely assimilated into Turkish culture, and Uyghur exiles in Istanbul enjoyed far better living conditions than their Kazakh counterparts, confined as they were to the impoverished Anatolian countryside. Delilhan immediately blamed İsa, whom he accused of siphoning off UN aid money for his own personal use, all the while inflating his and Emin’s own role in resisting the Chinese Communists in 1949. He reminded everyone of how İsa and Emin had fled Xinjiang long before the arrival of Communist troops, and how he, his father, Yolbars, and Osman Batur had waged a bloody struggle long after their departure. Fluent in Kazakh, Turkish, Chinese, Urdu, and English, Delilhan wasted no time in contacting Turkish authorities and lobbying for better living conditions for the Kazakh community.⁵¹

Delilhan was a cosmopolitan, experienced politician, with an established reputation among Kazakh youth. They had grown up hearing tall tales about the brave

⁵⁰ For those activities Delilhan carried out on behalf of Yolbars, including correspondence between the two men, see Zhongyang yanjiuyuan jindaishi yanjiusuo dang’an guan, 119.5/0002, 13–15, 156–59; 119.5/0001, “Zhiliu A-fu-han Xinjiang nanmin,” 249; 119.5/0001, “Jiuji Xinjiang nanmin,” 104, 163–65; 112.22/0003, 40–41, 96–99; 109/0005, 137–39; and *Lianhe bao*, May 26, 1960. On Delilhan’s work as an intelligence agent for the Indian government, see Ryosuke Ono, “American Aids for Xinjiang Kazakh Refugees in Kashmir: Missionaries, Anthropologist, and the Escapee Program,” paper presented at the “Emigrants/Muhacir from Central Asia to Middle East: Xinjiang Case during 1940-50s” conference, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, March 3, 2018, 15.

⁵¹ Ingvar Svanberg, *Kazak Refugees in Turkey: A Study of Cultural Persistence and Social Change* (Uppsala: Almqvist and Wiksell International), 172–74.

struggles of men like Delilhan, Osman, and Yolbars Khan. İsa, a complete stranger to the battlefield, had no rhetorical antidote to such a man. After Delilhan's arrival in Istanbul, a new rift emerged within the exile community in Turkey. Delilhan published editorials in the Turkish press attacking İsa and his supposedly partial treatment of the Uyghur communities in Turkey, at the expense of the Kazakh community. This rift was made possible in no small part due to Yolbars' efforts from Taiwan. Delilhan described Yolbars and the Nationalist government in Taiwan in glowing terms, and continued to sponsor student exchanges into the 1980s. One beneficiary of this exchange, Mustafa Öztürk, studied the Chinese martial arts in Taiwan and later became a taekwondo specialist. When this author met Delilhan in Istanbul in 2008, he was eighty-seven years old and basking in the reverent respect of the younger Kazakh generations. (He has since passed away). It was their parents who had moved from rural Anatolia to urban Istanbul under his auspices, eventually striking it rich via the manufacture of thermoplastic polymers. Now grossly outnumbering the Uyghur expatriate community in Istanbul and infinitely wealthier, these third-generation Kazakhs have elevated Delilhan and the long-departed Osman Batur into a new pantheon of Xinjiang historical icons. They have also gutted the Eastern Turkestan Refugee Association of almost any association with its founder, who passed away in 1995. By and large, this third generation of Kazakh youth did not seem to be aware of the considerable diplomatic legwork bequeathed their new patriarch by Yolbars Khan on his island of exile.⁵²

5. One China, Indivisible

On the morning of July 27, 1971, at Taipei's Veterans General Hospital, Yolbars Khan passed away in his sleep. He was eighty-three years old. Chiang Kai-shek wrote an inscription for his tomb lauding his many decades of loyalty and service to the central government. Yet it was his services after the fall of the mainland that were probably of greater import to the Chinese state than anything he did before 1949. By the time of his death, the frustration of İsa's political ambitions was well advanced, and the Eastern Turkestan Refugee Association could not claim anything close to a political monopoly over Xinjiang expatriate communities outside the Communist bloc. By maintaining a vigorous base of operations on Taiwan, Yolbars

⁵² Svanberg, *Kazak Refugees in Turkey*; Jacobs, "The Many Deaths of a Kazak Unaligned," 1304–12; and author interviews, Istanbul, May and April 2008.

emitted a viable gravitational pull for anyone willing to pay lip service to the Nationalist ethnic platform. That declarations of loyalty among the refugees were likely motivated more by poverty than ideology is beside the point. Though İsa enjoyed a considerable head start in the cultivation of refugee loyalties and funded his activities with money from the United Nations, he proved unable to insulate his constituency from the overtures of two powerful and influential Chinese metropolises. In the end, Yolbars effectively denied a steady stream of impressionable migrants to Turkey, retained crucial loyalties in Afghanistan and Kashmir, and, when the time was ripe, even infiltrated İsa's own de facto jurisdiction via proxy assault (Delilhan). Indeed, just two months before his death, the fruits of Yolbars' final labors were put on full display in the Nationalist press: Pakistan refugee Seyit Abdullah and his family of eight arrived in Taiwan to take up permanent residence on the island. Their portraits were splashed about in the newspapers.⁵³

Not all of the Xinjiang refugees responded favorably to Yolbars' overtures from Taiwan, however. In 1968, for instance, Yolbars sent his eldest son Yaqub to Turkey to meet with refugees in Istanbul. Upon his arrival, a group of Kazakh youths issued a statement against Yaqub, who, they lamented, had "changed his Turkish name (Yakup) into Chinese and made [others] call him Yo Dao Hung [Yao Daohong]." At the heart of the matter was a nearly twenty-year-old allegation that Yolbars and his son had killed three Kazakhs who had fled with them from Xinjiang through Tibet in February 1950. "If Yolbars Khan the betrayer, who lives in Formosa as the Governor-General of Eastern Turkestan," they wrote, "sends his son, the murderer, to visit us before the blood in his hand has dried, we see it as our duty to wake you up."⁵⁴

After the death of Yolbars, the Office for the Chairman of the Xinjiang Provincial Government quickly withered away. Under Yao Daohong (Yaqub), the office signed off on a letter to U.S. President Jimmy Carter in 1977 urging him not to normalize relations with the mainland government. Other than that, however, the archival record runs dry, and rumor has it that the bulk of the files were burned to avoid investigations of financial malfeasance. Then, in 1988, Yao submitted a routine

⁵³ *Lianhe bao*, July 28, 1971; and Zhongyang yanjiuyuan jindaishi yanjiusuo dang'an guan, 162.5/0001, 154–55.

⁵⁴ Hasan Oraltay, *Hürriyet Uğrunda Doğu Türkistan Kazak Türkleri*, 2. bs. (İstanbul: Türk Kültür Yayını, 1976), 229–31. The original statement is held in the private archives of Hasan Oraltay in the National Academic Library of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

application for a new government car, as permitted once every ten years. The proposed price tag of ¥600,000 attracted ministerial attention, and it was decided to shut down the office within a year. By this time the Xinjiang office was little more than a quaint curiosity of the Cold War, and several articles appeared in the newly democratic press poking fun at its past activities.⁵⁵ But it had been no laughing matter for the Generalissimo. During the twenty-two years that the Nationalist government on Taiwan had held the “China seat” in the United Nations, its “governor” of Xinjiang had played a crucial role in upholding Chiang’s “one China” policy. Just as the Generalissimo’s continued survival on Taiwan guaranteed that the island would not fall victim to Washington’s preferred “two Chinas” policy, so too did the Xinjiang government-in-exile help secure Chinese sovereignty—both Nationalist and Communist—over a historically non-Han, weakly integrated region.

In the form of İsa and Emin, the Nationalist Party encountered a credible threat to its narrative of Chinese political legitimacy in Xinjiang. It was all the more credible owing to the fact that İsa and Emin had originally developed their political platform within the umbrella of the Nationalist government itself. No longer inhibited by the lack of promotional opportunities once encountered in the Chinese administration in Xinjiang, İsa and Emin lacked only an ethnic constituency in whose name they could speak. This they found in the first few years after the Communist takeover, shepherding some two thousand Uyghurs and Kazakhs to Turkey and establishing organizational linkages among the many more thousands of Xinjiang refugees scattered throughout the Middle East. Before long, the Nationalist government in Taiwan deemed İsa and Emin’s political outfits in Istanbul to be of greater threat to China’s territorial integrity than the Chinese Communists themselves, a judgment they also levied on Xinjiang expatriates in receipt of Soviet support in Tashkent.

Once it became apparent that İsa and Emin would never relocate to Taiwan, the Xinjiang government in exile set out to sabotage their alternative narratives of political legitimacy. The consequences of İsa and Emin’s inability to withstand the relentless assault levied against them from Taiwan and its ideological proxies in South Asia stands in sharp contrast to the fate of ethnic politics in Tibet. After the Tibetan uprising against Communist rule in 1959, approximately 80,000 Tibetans fled with the Dalai Lama to India, where they set up a Government of Tibet in Exile. Less well known than the uprising itself is that the Nationalist administration on Taiwan, act-

⁵⁵ *Lianhe bao*, May 20, 1988; May 31, 1991; and December 28, 1991.

ing through its Committee for Tibetan and Mongolian Affairs in Taipei, also made overtures to the Tibetan leadership and offered assistance to the refugee community in Dharamsala. By and large, their overtures were rebuffed, and it was not until the late 1960s that any Tibetan political figures or students traveled to Taiwan to meet with Nationalist representatives. Offers of financial assistance, the construction of refugee schools in India, and invitations to travel to Taiwan were all declined. The Dalai Lama's personal fortune, estimated at nearly four million U.S. dollars, proved more than enough to sustain the Tibetan exile community on its own.⁵⁶

The only other person even remotely qualified to challenge the Dalai Lama's claim as spokesman for Tibet, the Panchen Lama, made the fateful decision to remain in China after 1959, where he publicly supported the Communist government. His subsequent persecution during the Cultural Revolution, combined with the failure of the Nationalists to recruit their own Tibetan eminence to Taiwan, meant that the Dalai Lama never had to endure a credible challenge to his leadership such as that experienced by İsa and Emin. Though the international reputation of prominent Xinjiang expatriates cannot be compared to someone of the Dalai Lama's stature, and the Islamic faith has never captured the sympathy of the Western world in the manner of an ostensibly "pacifist" Buddhism, still the comparison is illuminating. With regard to Tibet, the international community recognizes one very powerful, sympathetic, and credible expatriate spokesman. He stands in opposition to two Chinese metropolises, neither of which can claim much pride in its historical handling of the Tibet issue.

Regarding Xinjiang, however, neither the Eastern Turkestan Refugee Association in Istanbul nor the legacy of the Xinjiang government in exile in Taiwan is widely known, if at all. And that is exactly how Chinese officials in Beijing and Taipei prefer to keep it. As political scientist David Bachman notes, there exists today "no unified opposition and no widely agreed upon leader who is seen internationally (and even in China) as speaking for Uyghurs or Xinjiang in the way that the Dalai Lama speaks for Tibet."⁵⁷ Why did İsa and Emin prove unable to capitalize upon similar

⁵⁶ Chen Ming-hsiang, "Zangbao zai Tai shenghuo zhuangkuang diaocha ji fudao cuoshi zhi yanjiu," paper commissioned by the Committee for Tibetan and Mongolian Affairs and Tamkang University, 2002.

⁵⁷ David Bachman, "Making Xinjiang Safe for the Han? Contradictions and Ironies of Chinese Governance in China's Northwest," in *Governing China's Multiethnic Frontiers*, ed. Morris Rossabi (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004), 182.

missteps by Beijing in Xinjiang as the Dalai Lama had been able to do for the situation in Tibet? As this paper has shown, the answer lies not in Xinjiang or mainland China. Instead, we must look to Yolbars Khan and the Xinjiang government in exile in Taiwan to understand just how much opposition İsa and Emin faced in their efforts to propagate a new political vision for the Turkic peoples of Xinjiang.

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